

sordidness. I held back Green to see what we should see.

In the sepulchral gloom the lamp glowed feebly; but his position served to bring out Nichelstein's features with startling distinctness of high lights and shadows. He was not a pleasant picture. *Unkempt* is too tame a word. It smacks of a state too recent, too ephemeral. Think of an ivory Buddha, venerated with layer upon layer of the reek of ages, and you have it. From out the masses of tangled beard that hung down over a coat so grease-polished that a fly would have lost its footing, jutted a salient nose. A mutilated ear, a souvenir of the massacre, projected from the right side of his head. His eyes were remarkable,—dull with hopelessness, yet fired with an expectant glow. If eyes can be emaciated, they were. You knew that the face behind the beard was pinched and drawn.

Presently, as though his memory had thawed, the old man started, glanced round with hasty, surreptitious keenness, and felt in his breast pocket. It was the unguarded action of a man who wants to reassure himself,—the very action that points out carefully hidden wallets to the pickpocket. But Nichelstein drew forth a letter. Ye gods! such a letter to be in the possession of such a man and amid such surroundings! Small, crested, on delicately tinted stationery, even at a distance it breathed of refinement and culture. And Nichelstein, rocking to and fro, shaking his head, fumbled it and held it to his face like a religious fanatic gloating over a sacred relic.

Then Green intentionally stumbled against the win-

dow. "A letter from her," he mumbled with a make-shift laugh.

By the time we had left Nichelstein I was convinced: not by Green's ornate explanations, nor yet by his leading questions, which drew the story out in fragments. It was the way the old man hung on our words, fawned, thawed out, appealed for advice, just as the ignorant, suspicious of some dread malady, fawn on a surgeon thinking to effect a favorable diagnosis. It was about the letter!

This absent fine-lady daughter was becoming curious. She thought it strange that "Nicholsky" had never sent a picture of himself or of his big factory, and that men returning from New York had never heard of so prominent a man.

As he talked the old fellow became distraught, gibbering in a hodgepodge of Russian, English, and Yiddish. And the burden of his fears was that all was now ended, that he was discovered.

Green favored me with a wink, then examined the letter with a great show of erudition. "It's easy," he announced with blatant finality. "Don't lose your nerve. I'll scheme out a way, all right!"

His decision calmed the old man. A specialist had spoken! It was ludicrous.

"Great fun, eh, that purpose of his?" said Maury later. "Best joke ever!" But he lied.

"Quixotic!" I commented.

"Perhaps," he replied less jubilantly; "but such quixotism is the real instinct of the race. It is the

strength, the sinews, that hold us together as a people,—the sacrifice of parents for the children, the fidelity of children to the parent, the clannishness of brothers and sisters. Blood loyalty is the real race instinct. In the final balance all else is shadows."

"Does blood instinct always work?" I caviled. "How about this dainty daughter?"

"She'll never know," said he. "I'm going to make Nichelstein a sure-nough great man. Turn the American beast into the Russian hero! Gee! it'll be great fun conning those icicles in the old country. Watch the fun I have!"

If there was going to be fun, I wanted my share; so we agreed to

divide Nichelstein equally. He became our picture puzzle, scheming for him our diversion, talking of the plots our relaxation. Strange how diverting is the psychology of another's misery!

We went often to Nichelstein's, causing some comment and, strangely enough, added persecution for the old man. If this bit into his soul, he never complained. His gratitude was too profound. Once, when Benny Cohen, the son of a rival tailor, threw a stone and laid open the old man's forehead, we promised summary punishment; but this Nichelstein would not permit.

"He is not to blame," he said passively. "Look at what I am!" spreading his arms with sudden passion which as suddenly died out. "Perhaps I should do the same thing in his place. Besides it might defeat the purpose. Let be!"

Always the Purpose was the obsession of his cosmos; that is, so far as we were ever enlightened. Though often, when the taunts were extra scoring, he would send us off and retire behind the curtain that screened the rear of the shop. Once we stole in quietly and heard him wrestling with the Lord in prayer. Thus we learned that the ingrained devotion to the God of his Fathers was only less than his fidelity to his selfish purpose. He was pleading for mercy for setting it first.

MEANWHILE we had been erecting the structure of make-believe for the people in Russia. It was absorbing fun, and many the laugh we had—except when it drew on our pockets too strongly.

First we had to furnish evidence of Nichelstein's fine manufactory. This was accomplished at a stroke. At the office of his paper Green unearthed an old electrotype of an imposing structure, and from this had some neat letterheads struck off. They defied suspicion. There, in large type, were the words, "The Keystone Clothing Co.," and underneath, "M. Nicholsky, President." The flaring address at the intersection of two streets fitted in with the scheme, as the dingy shop was near the corner and the postmen knew Nicholsky's name. Besides his sign bore the inscription, "Keystone Cleaning Co." Thereafter letters to Russia went forth on this paper.

To remove all doubt that Nicholsky was a prominent man of affairs required some little headwork. Then one day the solution came. It should be no less convincing than the public print. Together we concocted glowing stories in Russian and English of a reception tendered "our prominent citizen, M. Nicholsky." The list of guests would have caused the heart of a parvenu to burst with envy. Scarcely a world-famous American from the President to Buffalo Bill but that graced the festive board at the Waldorf and rendered homage. Woven into the stories were allusions to the many charities to which he had contributed large sums. Certainly it was amusing. Green set this up in type himself, and then struck off copies on some half-printed newspaper stock that had been discarded. The clippings we obtained were of the sort that makes business for the press clipping bureaus. These too went to Russia.

The matter of a photograph was particularly difficult, especially as Nichelstein would not go to a penny's expense. Green ran free notices of a photograph shop and a costumer, and thus was able to borrow a camera and a high hat. A customer had brought in a frock coat for pressing, and when this was pinned in at the back the effect was undeniably distinctive. After the old man's beard and hair had been trimmed it required scheming to get the mutilated ear out of view; but the final picture of Nichelstein transformed into a prosperous business man was as startling as the "after taking" photo in a patent medicine advertisement.

All this had taken time, and the answering letters from Russia gave us the feeling that Belasco was not so much after all. Nichelstein himself was almost happy, and he began to show a disposition to depend upon us that was almost childlike in its finality. We were his saviors—we were welcome to credit for cleaning and pressing!

THEN one night we found the old man upset over a letter that had just come. Ruth's grandfather had died, leaving her considerable money. Over and over Nichelstein appealed to us. What would happen now? Would he fail because his money was no longer needed?

But the letters continued to come,—loving little letters, chiding the father for never having come to see her, begging him to come to Russia. They raised Nichelstein to the heights and dashed him to the depths of despair. We concocted a pretty reason why as yet he could not go to his fatherland,—political reasons; he was an exile! Later they would talk of it.

Then began to come weekly letters that alternately filled Green and me with delight and dismay. A new element had crept into the plot that we had not even considered. There were constant allusions to a young man, an American, of Chicago, who was traveling in Russia with his mother and sister. Between the lines we, even Nichelstein, could read that this young man loomed big in her eyes. By and by she wrote that she was preparing to travel with the party as far as London. Then the letters stopped abruptly.

Three times we wrote for an explanation; but still

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"If God wills, all
will come right."